DUNDEAD

Dundead Film Festival 2026
Sometimes We Have Fangs: Stephanie Rothman and The Velvet Vampire
Programme notes by Rachel Pronger

The Velvet Vampire is a film about hunger, pleasure and need. Its thesis – that women's appetites have the dangerous potential to upset the world order – swirls out of the murky undergrowth of second-wave feminist agitation, post-Charles Manson paranoia, and the dying embers of the 60s sexual revolution. The titular anti-heroine is a direct affront to patriarchal power systems, a supremely stylish sociopath, who has no compunction consuming the men (and women) who surround her.

Part of the power, and the fun, of *The Velvet Vampire*, is that it is a film which critiques the male gaze while emerging directly from a genre built for it: the exploitation movie. Stephanie Rothman's subversive take on the vampire myth illustrates perfectly the filmmaker's paradoxical career. Rothman, one of the first women directors to work within Los Angeles's B-movie scene in the 1960s, is a thoughtful, politically engaged cinephile who spent her entire career within 'fast and cheap' exploitation filmmaking. Rothman's films are velvet-wrapped Trojan horses, which smuggle witty social commentary and feminist perspective beneath the cheap thrills of B-movie convention. Most remarkably, during a period in which women directors were struggling to find a foothold anywhere near Hollywood, Rothman was churning out films, directing seven features between 1966-1974. There's an argument to be made that Rothman was one of the most interesting woman filmmakers working in the US during this period, yet for a longtime she was sidelined as a 'trash' filmmaker, a footnote in history, her films rarely screened and her legacy dismissed.

Rothman's route into filmmaking began as a student, when formative encounters with Bergman and Kubrick lit a cinephilic spark. At the University of Southern California, where she was one of only three women in the film department, her aspiration was to follow in the footsteps of her arthouse heroes. Nevertheless, Rothman was pragmatic and when she was offered the chance to work as an assistant to influential producer, director and self-proclaimed "Orson Welles of the Z movie" Roger Corman, she grabbed the opportunity with both hands.

It wasn't naïve of Rothman to think that a job with Corman would be the route into mainstream film. Corman had a reputation for giving aspiring directors their first jobs, and many of the architects of the 1970s 'New Hollywood' – such as Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich and Francis Ford Coppola – would make their debuts with his production company. By 1967, Rothman was directing her first feature, fizzy teen flick *It's a Bikini World!*, for Corman's production company. Rothman followed up with female buddy movie *The Student Nurses* (1970), a big commercial success hit which sparked a wave of copycats. Rothman had established herself as a resourceful director who (best of all, in Corman's opinion) could deliver films on time and on budget. Yet at the same time, that success also sealed Rothman's fate in other ways. It was while reading a review of *The Student Nurses* that Rothman first heard herself referred to as an "exploitation director". Up until this point, Rothman had seen herself simply as an

indie filmmaker. Now she had a label, one which would define her work for decades to come.

Rothman's ambivalent approach to the exploitation label is part of what makes her films so interesting. In her films, a tension lies beneath the goofy humour, lo-fi production values and contrived storylines that characterise the genre. Yet Rothman was also a pragmatist, and in the 1960s, even with the so-called *Easy Rider, Raging Bull* era of New Hollywood on the horizon, women were still largely locked out of mainstream filmmaking. Excluded from the mainstream, women directors were pushed towards areas with less money, less prestige and fewer gatekeepers: documentary, experimental filmmaking and exploitation films.

Rothman was far from the only woman to find work in exploitation film – her peers included the likes of Barbara Peeters, Beverly Sebastian and Doris Wishman – but what perhaps makes her standout is the consistent and systematic way she sought to subvert the genre's power dynamics. Early on, Rothman established a set of rules for herself. She resolved that her films would not depict sexual violence on screen, that nudity would be 'equal opportunity' between her male and female characters, violence would always have consequences, gender roles would be reversed, and her films would reflect the social reality within which they were made. These rules, Rothman believed, would enable her to work as a filmmaker within exploitation without losing her integrity.

Rothman's rules are very much in evidence in *The Velvet Vampire*, Rothman's third film as sole director. The push-pull of Rothman's relationship with genre runs through the film like a ligature. A bait-and-switch opening sequence, in which a would-be male attacker's attempt to assault a young woman on a dark LA corner ends messily, provides a nice metaphor for Rothman's own delight in playing with her audience's expectations. Be careful not to underestimate us, Rothman seems to be saying; sometimes we have fangs.

From this atmospheric opening sequence unfolds a deliciously kitsch, stylish and knowing film, which transposes vampire lore to groovy early-70s California. Diane Le Fanu (Celeste Yarnall) is a reclusive blood sucker who ventures into downtown LA in search of prey. At a gallery opening, she picks up Lee (Michael Blodgett) and Susan (Sherry Miles), a tanned but vacuous couple, who she persuades to visit her remote desert mansion. In the spectacular isolation of the Mojave, the city's grey glass and concrete melts into deserted sand and shimmering heat. Diane, who is right at home zooming around the desert in a dune buggy and a series of enormous hats, deposits the couple in a bedroom with a two-way mirror and embarks on an unabashed double seduction. The atmosphere oscillates between delightful camp and uncanny strangeness, as the couple find themselves haunted by surreal visions. In a recurring dream sequence worthy of Leonora Carrington, Lee and Susan lie in a bed on the dunes as Diane emerges through a mirror, dressed in flowing red robes like a cult leader.

It's worth remembering that Rothman would have been working on *The Velvet Vampire* at the peak of Charles Manson-mania. The infamous Tate–LaBianca murders, which had sparked panic across California and marked a symbolic death for hippy idealism, had

taken place only a couple of years earlier in 1969, and the film would have been in production during the media circus trial of Manson and his followers. While never explicitly referenced, this ambient horror seems present in the film's borderline psychedelic atmosphere, in Diane's cult-like aura, and in the paranoid energy of a closing chase sequence, in which the vampire appears in the city as a ghost-like splinter of evil infecting the wholesome 'real world' with her dangerous energy.

Of course, female vampires have always had a special significance in horror. The image of a radically autonomous, entirely irresistible and ultimately deadly woman on the loose is a nightmarish challenge to male authority. Even as he is unapologetically attracted to her, Lee condemns Diane as a "desert freak." Yet although she is ultimately punished for upturning the natural order, Diane's presence sparks an awakening in Susan, who shakes off her prudish all-American attitude to sex and emerges as a heroine in charge of her own destiny. In one memorable sequence, Diane delivers a monologue on the link between female sexual agency and misogyny. "Susan, have you noticed how men envy us?" she asks as the two women sit by the pool. "The pleasure we have, that only we can have. We can't help it, it's just our nature, the way we are. And in their secret hearts they hate us for it, because they can never know what it's like."

The Velvet Vampire arrived at the mid-point of Rothman's career, but the film also marked a kind of ending. It was the last she would make under Corman, after which she broke off to form her own production company, Dimension Pictures, alongside her husband and frequent creative collaborator Charles S Swartz. Independently, the pair would make three more films which pushed at the boundaries of exploitation's political potential – *Group Marriage* (1972), *Terminal Island* (1973) and *The Working Girls* (1974). After that though, Rothman hit her limits. Feeling she had taken exploitation filmmaking as far as she could, Rothman shopped lager scale projects around the studios, but was met with closed doors. At one point MGM called her in for a meeting and asked for her help – they loved *The Velvet Vampire* and wanted to make a film like it, so they asked Rothman to advise their chosen male director. Rothman, non-plussed, asked why they didn't just hire her instead; she didn't get the job.

By the end of the 1970s Rothman, exhausted by industry sexism, had dropped out of filmmaking altogether. Yet, thankfully, this story does have a kind of happy ending. Over the past few years, a resurgence of interest has pushed Rothman back into the film world's consciousness. New restorations of her work premiered at Bologna and Venice, with Rothman happily presiding over the screenings. Thanks to this restoration effort, and the hard work of feminist critics and genre film advocates, [1] Rothman is gradually finding her way into cinemas, and the canon. It's been a long road, but Rothman is back. Like the immortal vampire of lore, it seems that films this brilliant, just can't be killed. Don't underestimate us; sometimes we have fangs.

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[1] A special mention to Dr Alicia Kozma here, whose brilliant book *The Cinema of Stephanie Rothman: Radical Acts in Filmmaking*, provides an indispensable and comprehensive overview of her life and work.